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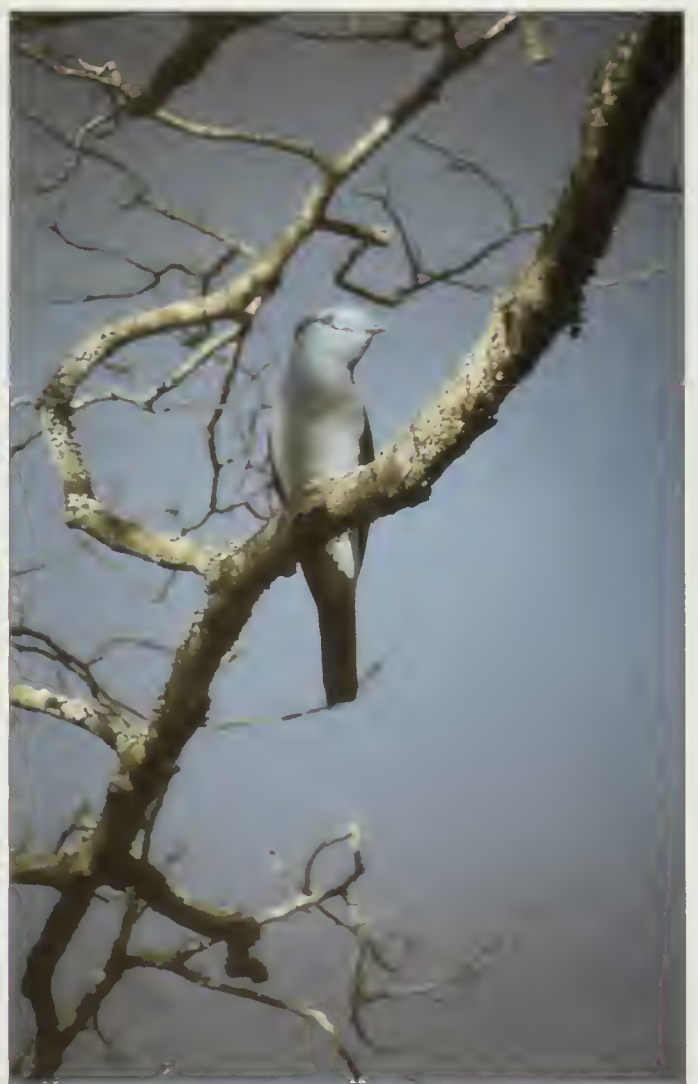
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Mystery birds from Djibouti

Geoff and Hilary Welch

La description de deux espèces non-identifiées observées à Djibouti est présentée dans l'espoir que d'autres observations puissent contribuer à l'identification de ces deux oiseaux. La première espèce est un beaumarquet apparenté au Beaumarquet melba *Pytilia melba* mais n'ayant pas de rouge dans le plumage. La deuxième est un souimanga, appartenant probablement au genre *Nectarinia*. Les deux espèces ont uniquement été observées dans les lambeaux de forêt situés sur le côté nord du Golfe de Tadjoura, habités par l'endémique Francolin somali *Francolinus ochropectus*. Il est intéressant de noter que des oiseaux ressemblant le *Pytilia melba sudanensis* 'typique' ont été observés sur le côté sud du Golfe, dans une zone sans forêt ni francolin.

Despite its relatively small size (c23,000 km²), the ornithology of Djibouti has been very little-studied. Most recent understanding results from seven expeditions undertaken by us between 1984–1993 (principally to study the autumn migration of raptors across the Bab-el-Mandeb straits⁹, the endemic Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus* and near-endemic Bankoualé Palm *Livistona carinensis* in the Goda and Mabla massifs, and the globally threatened Arabian Bustard *Ardeotis arabs*⁷) and the work of Alain Laurent, a resident of Djibouti between 1981–1993. A total of 343 species^{3,pers.obs.} has been recorded in the country, a remarkable total given the extremely limited observer coverage and limited variety of habitats.

During our fieldwork, we observed two species which currently remain unidentified—a pytilia, apparently closely related to Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba* based on its plumage and a sunbird. Detailed field notes and photographs (of variable quality) are presented here and it is hoped that the publication of this information here will either stimulate further fieldwork on these taxa or perhaps bring to light additional records, either from Djibouti or adjacent countries, which may help to resolve the currently indeterminate taxonomic position of these birds.

The pytilia

Details of the discovery of the pytilia were published in Welch & Welch⁸ where it was proposed the Djibouti birds should be treated as a previously undescribed subspecies of Green-winged Pytilia *P. m. flavicaudata*. Photographs are lodged at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, UK—reference nos: PL2001.1, PL2002.1, PL2003.1 & PL2003.2—but the rules of scientific nomenclature decree that a specimen is necessary as a reference from which to support the formal naming of a taxon and therefore the Djibouti birds remain effectively unnamed^{1,5,6}.



Map showing location of Djibouti

Description

Male. Crown, nape, rear half of ear-coverts, hindneck, mantle and lores grey, the grey on the mantle gradually shading into dull greeny brown on the scapulars, lower mantle and wings. Forehead, chin, throat, frontal half of ear-coverts, sides of neck and upper breast bright golden-yellow. Lower breast, belly and vent white. Underparts marked with fine black barring extending from upper breast to lower belly and undertail-coverts, becoming coarser and broader on the lower belly and flanks, but absent from vent. Tail rich golden-yellow, only slightly duller than face. Central tail feathers greenish, outer tail feathers very bright yellow. Bill pinkish with grey culmen. Legs and feet pink, irides deep red.

Female. Similar to male but with yellow of face and upper breast replaced by pale grey; tail slightly duller yellow and wings brighter green.

Call of both sexes a short, loud *pituk*; apparently this is typical of all grey-lored subspecies of *P. melba* (J Nicolai pers. comm.).

Compared to 'normal' *P. melba*, Djibouti birds differ in completely lacking red on the face or tail. Details of our observations were sent to J Nicolai who has undertaken extensive studies of pytilia species in the field and captivity. He confirmed that the birds from Djibouti were different to any that he had studied or was aware of, while most similar to *P. m. jessei* which occurs from Eritrea south to Dire Dawa¹⁰.

The sunbird

Apart from the description which appeared in our Djibouti II expedition report⁷, information on the birds observed in Djibouti has never been widely available. Therefore full details are given below.

Three sunbirds, a pair and a presumed well-grown young, were observed in Wadi Tôha (11°48'N 42°45'E) on 24 November 1985. A few photographs were obtained of the 'female'. These have been compared with all available literature and all sunbird specimens in the British Museum and we have concluded that they do not resemble any known species. Copies of our field descriptions and photographs have also been examined by Hilary Fry and Robert Cheke, again without a clear identification being suggested. These are the only known observations.

Description

Size judged to be similar to Shining Sunbird *Nectarinia babessinica*. In all three individuals the most striking feature—which appears to be lacking in all other sunbird species—was a bright, slightly metallic yellow-green crown, most pronounced in the male. (The possibility that the yellow crowns could have been caused by a dusting of pollen was considered at the time but rejected by all three observers. The crown of the male had a slightly metallic sheen, pollen would have been more likely to result in a matt appearance. Additionally the amount and distribution of yellow in all three birds appeared to be identical, making us feel that pollen was unlikely to be the cause. However, this possibility cannot be 100% eliminated.) The 'female' was dull earth-brown above and dirty white below. The wings were slightly darker than the rest of the upperparts; pale tips to the median- and greater-coverts formed two pale wingbars. Many of the flight feathers also had paler margins and the alula was pale brown. The tail was black. The undertail-coverts were slightly paler than

the remainder of the underparts, many feathers having distinct blackish tips. The bill was long, markedly decurved and black. Legs and feet black. Irides large and dark.

The male differed from the 'female' in having the chin, throat and upper breast bright metallic green, with a narrow black band below this separating the green from the remainder of the underparts. Otherwise it resembled the 'female' while appearing slightly darker overall. It is possible that this bird was in non-breeding plumage.

The presumed young bird was very similar to the 'female' but was noticeably paler below, had distinct pale supercilia and lacked blackish tips to the undertail-coverts.

The general structure and behaviour of these birds suggests that they may belong to the genus *Nectarinia*, perhaps being closely related to *N. babessinica* or *N. mariquensis*, an interpretation shared by Hilary Fry (*in litt.*).

Habitat

Both the pytilia and the sunbird were found in areas of secondary forest primarily comprising mixed *Acacia mellifera* *Rhigozum somalense* scrub, with numerous taller *Acacia seyal*. The pytilia has also been found in horticultural gardens in the vicinity of the native-style tourist village at Dittilou (11°47'N 42°42'E), in the Goda massif. These observations range between 500–850 m above sea level for the pytilia, whilst the sunbirds were seen at 180 m.

Discussion

Apart from the undetermined taxonomic position of these birds, one of the most interesting aspects of our observations is that both forms have been observed only in the same remnant forest areas of the Goda and Mabla massifs inhabited by the endemic Djibouti Francolin—see map. There is, therefore, the intriguing possibility that the pytilia and sunbird became isolated

Figures 1–4 (page 48)

- 1 Male pytilia, near Dittilou, Goda massif, Djibouti, May 1987 (Alain Laurent)
- 2 Female sunbird, Wadi Tôha, Goda massif, Djibouti, November 1985 (Geoff & Hilary Welch)
- 3 Female Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, near Dittilou, Goda massif, Djibouti, March 1989 (Alain Laurent)
- 4 Displaying male Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, near Dittilou, Goda massif, Djibouti, March 1989 (Alain Laurent)



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M. Woodcock

from their nearest relatives as has the francolin. Could all three have evolved into distinctive taxa contemporaneously? Until appropriate biometric and DNA data are available, examination of this question cannot be progressed but the suggestion seems highly plausible on geographical grounds.

We have observed the yellow-tailed pytilias in 1985, 1987 and 1990 with all birds, apart from those involved in the initial discovery in the Mabla mountains, being seen in the Goda massif. Alain Laurent saw birds regularly at Dittilou from 1987 until the outbreak of civil war in Djibouti in 1992 when travel to the north of the country became impossible. In January 1993 we made observations in south Djibouti which added an interesting dimension to the puzzle. On 22 January 1993, we found a male resembling typical *P. m. soudanensis* ie with red face and red tail at Wadi Qalan (11°06'N 42°49'E) plus a further eight birds in Wadi Hadla (11°03'N 42°57'E) later the same day. Both of these sites are on the southern side of the Gulf of Tadjoura (c75 km south-south-east of Wadi Tôha) where there is no forest (and the francolin does not occur).

The taxonomic situation regarding *P. melba* is complex with as many as 13 subspecies described and intermediates occurring where subspecies overlap. Clement *et al*¹ recognise seven subspecies, with *P. m. soudanensis* being that occurring in areas bordering Djibouti.

Three other species of sunbird have been recorded in Djibouti—Shining Sunbird and Pygmy Sunbird *Antbreptes metallicus* (both relatively common and widespread wherever there is suitable habitat) and Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird *A. orientalis* (two records: males in Wadi Qalan on 21 January 1993 and Deg Ouïen on 10 April 1993).

Clarification of the taxonomic situation of the pytilia and the sunbird is also relevant to assessment of the conservation importance of the Goda and Mabla massifs. Because of the presence of the Djibouti Francolin, the Forêt du Day in the Goda massif is ranked 37= in terms of its conservation importance for threatened birds in Africa², however should the pytilia and sunbird prove to be new species and therefore

endangered due to their restricted ranges, the Forêt du Day's ranking would rise to 8= and the area would qualify under current criteria as an Endemic Bird Area (EBA). Such a re-evaluation of the status of these forests would strengthen efforts to institute greater protection for Djibouti's remnant forests and their unique wildlife.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Alain Laurent for the loan of his slides of the pytilia and francolin, and to Martin Woodcock for the painting which accompanies this contribution. ♀

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Plate on page 49: upper three birds unidentified sunbird, left to right, male, presumed immature and female; lower bird unidentified male pytilia (Martin Woodcock)

These illustrations are based on field notes and photographs provided by the authors, not reference to skins. The illustrations of the male and immature sunbird should not be viewed as a definitive references for these plumages as they are representations compiled from written descriptions and slides of the female.